Rai, Khambu, Subba, Kirant, etc : ethnic labels or political and land tenure categories ? : logics of identification of an ensemble of populations in Nepal

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Logics of identification of an ensemble of populations in Nepal

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In Nepal, the term *Kirant* (or Kirat, Kirata, Kiranti) designates an ensemble of Tibeto-Burmese-speaking populations which inhabit the mountains in the east of the country. The list of the populations included in this appellation has varied, however, depending on the authors, and this has been the case since the first Western observers. If for Kirkpartick (1811) the Kirant were a distinct group from the Limbu, for Hamilton (1986 [1819]) the Limbu formed a branch of the Kirant, whilst for Campbell (1840) it was the opposite; Hamilton included the Hayu in this ensemble and Campbell the Yakkha; for Vansittart (1896), the Kirant designated only the Rai populations, which included among others the Khambu and the Yakkha, etc. According to Campbell, these were not confusions only made by the outside observers; they were also the reflection of indigenous discourse (1840: 595). Things are just as confused with regard to the subgroups forming each of the Kirant groups. Thus, in the ethnographic literature, the Rai are presented as being divided into different groups, each being defined by a specific shared name, a common ancestor, a tendency towards endogamous unions, a specific language (twenty-two Rai languages, according to the official census), a particular social and ritual organization and a territory. Attempts at classifying these groups have, nevertheless, yielded very variable results. Campbell (1840), the first to try to classify the Rai groups, proposed a list of twenty-eight names; later, Hodgson (1858) compiled a list of seventeen, Risley (1981 [1891]) fifty-seven, Vansittart (1896) forty-five and Morris (1993 [1933]) seventy-three. The diversity of groups and appellations grew even further when linguists conducted their first attempt at systematically recording the languages spoken by these groups: their list contains more than 300 entries (Hansson 1991). The number of groups listed varies so much because the criteria selected to define their borders prove, in fact, to be fluctuating, and none of them appear utterly pertinent. The different languages 'slip over into another language rather than undergoing an abrupt transition' (Gaenszle 2000: 107), the specificity of socio-ritual organizations is very relative (there are sometimes as many differences between villages of the same group as between villages of two different groups), the groups'

endogamy is partial and different Rai groups occupy territories which are not necessarily adjacent ... All these points illustrate the complexity of the denominations confronting the first Western observers.[1]

In order to understand the reasons which caused such variations in the identification of the Kirant groups, we shall be led to look for the origin and the meaning of the main ethnonyms of these populations of eastern Nepal and to show the logic governing their distribution. In doing so, we shall particularly stress a principle which has perhaps been too neglected: the political one. We shall thus endeavour to draw a parallel between the main appellations of these populations and the relations they have been able to maintain with the dominant powers of the region. This approach, initiated by various authors working on the region (Levine 1987; Krauskopff 1990; Gaenszle 2000, 2002) might, however, seem inappropriate in the case of the populations known as Kirant. For these differ from most of the other Nepalese ethnic groups by the fact that they long remained outside the spheres of political and cultural influences of the region's kingdoms, whether Hindu or Buddhist. The impact of these kingdoms on the Kirant populations remains, nonetheless, important on several levels, particularly – and it is this we shall try to show – for the constitution of the ethnic entities existing today. To illustrate this we shall interest ourselves principally in one of the main groups known as Kirant, the Rai, starting from the narrowest identification level and proceeding towards the broadest. Let us point out we propose partially conjectural interpretations which are avenues of research, rather than definitive conclusions. This research will, nonetheless, enable us to add certain elements to the political history of the region.

Ways of identification on the local level, between kinship and locality

If we confine ourselves to Rai discourses, the question of identity and the demarcation between groups is relatively simple. By laying down a common origin for all living beings, the mythological stories relate how the different species, then the different groups of humans, gradually diversified with the events which marked, in different generations, the separation between brothers. All beings are thus organized into a sort of genealogical tree and each branch marks the arrival of a new group with, on the last levels of separation, the birth of tribes, proto-clans, clans and finally lineages. In this set of identity referents ranging from the most to the least encompassing, an individual is defined with respect to his interlocutor's position. It is therefore a matter of a segmentary conception of identity, as defined by Evans-Pritchard (1968 [1940]). A Rai man, according to whether he wants to identify himself with or differentiate himself from his interlocutor, will choose either the lowest common denominator or the lowest differential denominator (that is to say, the last level of segmentation before the lowest common denominator). Let us take the example of Parsuram, an inhabitant of the village of Bung (a village situated in the Hongu Valley, to the east of the Solu-Khumbu district). He will distinguish himself from Jairampa, who lives in the

house next door, by stressing his membership of the Honger (*hânga* N, *gong* K) lineage, while Jairampa is from the Kapcisi lineage. But they will both claim membership of the same exogamous clan (*thâr* N, *yas* K) in the presence of a villager from a different clan. Thus, with regard to a member of the Wadiri clan, they will introduce themselves as Tomocha. On a higher level, the members of these two clans recognize themselves in the term Chemsi, a sort of proto-clan descended from this eponymous ancestor. They do this to distinguish themselves from the members of the clans which are said to be descended from Tamsi, his brother.[2] Then the descendants of Chemsi and Tamsi will distinguish themselves from their neighbours, the Nachering, who are descended from another ancestor, and they will then say they belong to the Kulung (*jât* N, *pau* K[3]) group. Last, the Kulung and the Nachering will be able to claim common membership of the Rai ensemble, with regard to a Limbu for example.

This identification system based on kinship[4] becomes more complicated, however, because of the fact there is another logic based on locality. The different levels of membership are: the house, the neighbourhood, the village, the community of villages and the valley (if the administrative division of the territory into *ward*, *Village Development Committee*, district and province is ignored). The term house (*khim*) designates both the building and the family, generally nuclear, which lives in it. The neighbourhood is a group of adjacent houses which form the main sphere of interaction and solidarity and also form a ritual unit during the celebration of certain cults. In some contexts (social, economic and ritual), it is the village (which is sometimes multi-ethnic) that will appear to be the unit of reference. On a higher level, the community of villages – which comprises two or three villages, generally adjacent, between which there are a great many exchanges (in particular of women) – can serve as a membership referent. Last, the valley, which is called by the name of its main river, makes it possible to distinguish oneself from the inhabitants of neighbouring valleys. The inhabitants of a valley meet up with each other at the various markets which are organized from time to time in one or another of the surrounding villages.

There are therefore two main identification criteria – kinship and locality – between which there are some correspondences. And from these correspondences emerges a third set of identification criteria, which makes the situation all the more complicated. These reference entities are: the localized clan, the community of those who participate in the territorial cults and the community of those belonging to the ancestral territory. The localized clan includes all the members of a clan living in the same village. This is the most important membership unit in everyday life: it constitutes the main level of economic and ritual solidarity (notably through participation in marriages and funerals) and, until very recently, its members controlled the same territory. As the members of a localized clan often live very close to each other, the neighbourhood tends to correspond to it, but this is not systematic. Together all the localized clans of the same village form the community of owners of the village's ancestral territory. Its members meet up three times a year, during the territorial rites (*tos* K, *bhûme* N).

This community does not include all the inhabitants of a village as, to take the example of the Kulung again, only the inhabitants descended from the founder brothers Chemsi and Tamsi can participate. Village members from another Rai group or another caste or, conversely, descendants who do not live in the village are excluded from it. On a higher level, we find the community of those belonging to the valley's ancestral territory.[5] This ensemble includes all the people who live in the valley and are descendants of the two brothers who appropriated it. The people who do not belong to the clans descended from Chemsi and Tamsi, as well as the people who, while being descended from these proto-clans, live outside the traditional territory forming the valley, are excluded from it. These other three levels of membership – localized clan, cult community and Kipat community of the valley – are the result of two logics, based on kinship *and* locality, which combine without, however, perfectly corresponding.

The segmentary character of identity and the use of these dual criteria, the one (kinship) being favoured in discourses, the other (locality) being very important in practice, make it possible to understand the confusion which reigns in attempts at classifying the groups as soon as one goes beyond a certain scale. Let us examine this point. The first criterion that comes to mind for determining the existence of a particular group is the existence or not of a specific name; thus, the Kulung form a group because they say so. However simple this criterion may appear, it is not without problems, for it is difficult to determine the pertinent level of fragmentation – clan, proto-clan, group – to take into account in these discourses. Let us take the village of Phelmong in the Hongu valley. Its inhabitants say they form, with those of the village of Chocholung, a group apart, the Phelmong Rai. But they also say that, with the people of Namlung and Sotang, they are part of a larger ensemble named the Sotang Rai. Last, they claim that the Sotang Rai form a single subgroup of a bigger group: that of the Nachering for some (according to a kinship criterion), of the Kulung for others (according to a locality criterion).

This ambiguity between the different levels of segmentation is increased when part of the population moves: after migration, what was a clan name can become the group name and vice versa. Thus the Sotang, a group made up of numerous clans, presents itself as a group distinct from the Kulung; yet when they reside in Mewahang territory, they say they are a Kulung clan (Gaenszle 2000: 77). Conversely, in the Phedi valley, to which many groups have recently migrated, the Kulung and the Sotang who live there no longer present themselves as such but use their clan name as a group name. For, as migrations generally take place in kin groups, if the members of a Kulung clan have been occupying a new territory alone and for a long time and are then joined by the members of others clans, the latter can be seen as newcomers on this territory, from whom it is a good thing to distinguish oneself.

When the inhabitants of a locality adopt the members of a foreign group, a new name may be created. Vansittart takes the example of a Rai man (whom he calls Khambu, see below) from the Sangpang group who wanted to become part of the Limbu group called Maniyambo:

> After certain ceremonies, [...] he will be admitted into the Limbû nation and as a member of the Maniyâmbo tribe, *but he must retain the name of his Khambû tribe*, and thus he and all his descendants will become Sangpang Maniyambo – the name of his Khambû (e.g. Rai) 'tribe', sinking into the name of a clan of the Maniyambo tribe.
>
> (Vansittart 1896: 129; his italics)

It is perhaps a similar adoption process which explains the presence of a Lorunga tribe, said to be of Rai origin, among a Tibetan population, the Bhote of the Upper Arun – for a Rai tribe called Lohorung is located near this Tibetan group (Hardman 2000: 36).

Two groups who, in a particular context, were distinguished by different names can also merge after a migration which has united them in the same locality. A Kulung and a Mewahang living in Bala are aware of their differences; but if they both migrate to a Bantawa village they may well call themselves Balali, 'people from Bala', the name of a locality serving here as a group name (many examples of this kind will be found in Hansson 1991).

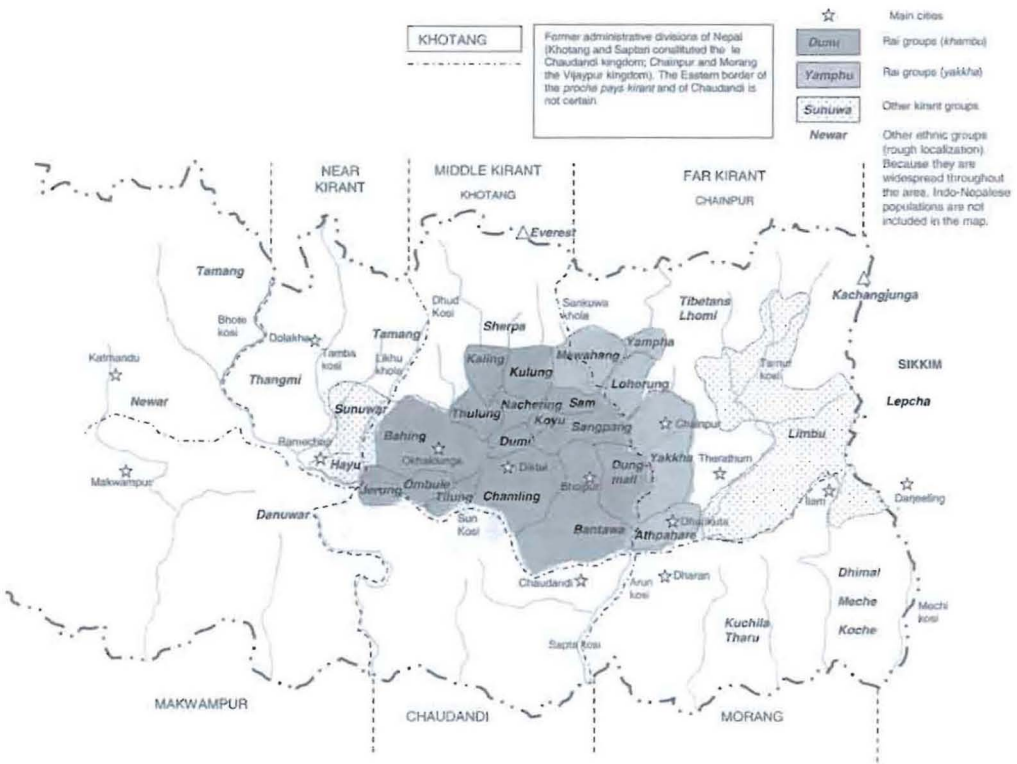
Whether it be the segmentary character of identity, the combined use of kinship and locality criteria in the determining of entities, or the importance of migrations, splits and mergings, exogenous denominations and internal renominations, all these elements combine to illustrate the confusion that can exist in the demarcation between groups and, therefore, the difficulty of naming them. This becomes even more true when one moves further away from the local scale, for it seems that the most pertinent and stable identification unit is the localized clan. One might therefore wonder how and on what bases the supra-local categories like Rai, Sunuwar, Limbu and Kirant, which all comprise a vast ensemble of populations, were established, although the populations these ensembles contain speak different languages, have a strong tendency towards endogamy and apparently never formed a unified political body. This is what we are going to try to understand in attempting to retrace the history of these populations' different ethnonyms.

Ethnic appellations and administrative offices

Today the populations situated between the Dhud, Sun and Arun Rivers (see Map 2.1) are known by the name of Rai. The term comes from the Sanskrit term *raja*, which literally means 'king'. To understand how this term became an ethnonym it is necessary to say a few words about the region's history.

The Kirant make their appearance in modern historiography thanks to the writing of Hamilton (1986 [1819]). The latter recounts that in the fifteenth century a kingdom stretched over the Morang plain to the south of the Kirant region. In the early sixteenth century, the prince of this kingdom, Vijayanarayan, took into his service Singha Ray,

> who was Hang[6] or hereditary chief of the Kirats, that occupied the hills north of Morang. [... The prince] soon after took occasion to put the moun-



Map 2.1 Localization of Kirant groups, main cities and rivers, and former political unions

> tain chief to death, under pretence, that he, being an impure beef-eating monster, had presumed [*sic*] to defile a Hindu woman. Baju Tay, son of the mountain chief, immediately retired, and, going to the Rajput chief of Makwanpur, promised to join him with all his Kirats, if that prince would enable him to destroy the murderer of his father. This was accordingly done, and the *Hang* was constituted sole *Chautariya* or hereditary chief minister of the principality, which dignity his descendants enjoyed.
>
> (Hamilton 1819: 133)

The first Kirant to hold the title of 'Ray' (from which the term Rai will come) would therefore appear to be Singha, a local chief whom Vijayanarayan took into his service in order to reconcile the turbulent populations inhabiting the fringes of his kingdom. After having helped the Sen (a powerful dynasty reigning at the time over western Nepal and, recently, over Makwampur) to conquer Vijayanarayan's kingdom, Singh's son was awarded the status of chief minister, *chautariya*. His descendants, for nine generations, would have the title of Ray added to their name. With these nominations, the Sen kings made sure there would be no revolts and built up a reserve of warriors in case of necessity. This process of political alliance between a Hindu monarchy and Kirant chiefs marked the beginning of the latters' integration into a state system, even if this integration was for a long time very tenuous and essentially nominal. It should also be noted that succession conflicts very rapidly divided these newly conquered lands into three regions: Makwampur, Chaudandi and Vijaypur. The northern part of the Vijaypur kingdom region would become, after Nepal had become a kingdom, what would be called the Far Kirant (*pallo kirant*); the northern region of the kingdom of Chaudandi would become the Middle Kirant (*mâjh kirant*), while the region composing the former kingdom of Dolakha would be called the Near Kirant (*wallo kirant*). It should be added that the Middle Kirant is principally peopled by the aforementioned Sunuwar, the Near Kirant by the Rai and the Far Kirant by the Limbu. We shall realize further on the importance of this information.

At the end of the eighteenth century, at the time of the conquest and the integration of the Kirant into the state of Nepal recently created by the Indo-Nepalese (called the Gurkhas), the use of the name Rai began to spread. The scarcity of documents makes it impossible to know how this change came about. Whatever the case, by the end of this period, the term Rai no longer seems to have been reserved for the sole descendants of the Sen kings' Kirant ministers but was applied to all Kirant chiefs. It is important to know that, in the aim of stabilizing the border regions, formed by the lands of the Rai and the Limbu, who had put up strong resistance, the Gorkha monarchy granted the Kirant a certain amount of autonomy and kept their chiefs and/or installed new ones in the villages. The latter received certain prerogatives – such as administering justice, collecting taxes, managing tribal lands – which the new king acknowledged as inalienable. Fragments of the correspondence between the Gorkha kings and these chiefs still exist. For example, a royal edict of 1773 intended for

certain dignitaries of the Far Kirant is addressed to 'Jang Rai, Fung Rai, Jamuna Rai and all other Limbus and Rais' (Anonymous 1974a: 84). This letter exhorted them to acknowledge the conquest of their territory and promised them protection in return for their allegiance to the new rulers. The term 'Rai' was therefore added to individual names. These people seem to be Limbu or Rai from the Far Kirant (also called 'Rai Subha' in a second letter, ibid. 84). As for the chiefs from the Middle Kirant, in a third letter, dated 1774, they are called Majhiya[7] (ibid. 82). Between the end of the eighteenth and the middle of the nineteenth century, the use of the term 'Rai', until then fluctuating, became more precise and designated above all the chiefs of the Middle Kirant (while those of the Far Kirant would take the title of Subba).

The title of 'Rai' was therefore originally the privilege of chiefs, the new representatives of Nepalese royal power, and it was only gradually that the term became an ethnonym. It may be thought that this semantic shift can be explained by the region's inhabitants' desire to give themselves a prestigious status. More generally speaking, though, it is common on the Indian subcontinent for a group to be designated by the title held by its chief (see, for example, Clarke 1995). This metonymic use of the term Rai to refer to the whole group is, moreover, not specific to the populations concerned. A royal edict of 1836 was addressed to the 'Rai, Majhiya, Jimidare and other inhabitants of Majhkirat [the Middle Kirant]...' (Anonymous 1987: 138). In designating a political office, it is indeed the whole group which is being addressed.

Though the populations were often designated by the title held by their chief, this was not always how they liked to present themselves. Vansittart (1896: 129) recorded, at the end of the nineteenth century, that when those people we today call Rai were asked what their name was, they replied: 'Jimidare' (or 'Jimi'). This word is a corruption of *jamindâr*, a term of Persian origin which means 'landowner'. Under the Sen, the term Jamindâr referred in particular to the office of the person responsible for land taxes (Hamilton 1986 [1819]: 149). The British often took this term for an ethnonym, sometimes understood as a synonym of Rai, sometimes seen as designating a specific population (this was notably the case among the Kirant emigrants to Sikkim; Grierson 1967 [1909]; O'Malley 1907). It is therefore an exonym, again related to the prerogatives of these populations – that is to say, the fact of possessing inalienable tribal lands (*kipat*).

The borrowing of terms related to a political or land tenure context in order to coin an ethnonym (like Rai and Jimi) is found among other groups known as Kirant. Thus, the Yakkha, a group situated to the east of the Arun River, often uses the term Dewan to present itself; this is said to come from the Persian (Turner 1980 [1931]), and means 'minister of state', 'magistrate'. In Moghol India, Diwan designated the government officials in charge of financial administration (Pradhan 1991: 64) and among the Sen 'the minister of finance' (Hamilton 1986 [1819]: 138). It is then said to have been attributed to the Yakkha chiefs by the Gurkha kings (Russel 1997) and thus indicated, like the term 'Rai', a political office.[8] In the same way, the Sunuwar like to be called 'mukhiya'

(*mukhiyâ*, from the root *mukh*, the mouth, designates a village chief). Likewise, though it is by the term 'Limbu'[9] that the populations east of the Arun are known, the majority of them called themselves 'Subba'. This term, which comes from Arabic and means 'governor', spread without doubt to Nepal *via* the Moghol Empire, which, under Akbar, was organized into administrative divisions called Suba. Under the Sen, the term Subba designated the officers in charge of collecting taxes and enforcing the law (Hamilton 1986 [1819]: 149). The name was then used by the Gorkha administration to designate the new regional administrators, but also the local Limbu chiefs. Although the name has never been adopted as a group name, it was nonetheless early on added to the names the Limbu gave themselves (Vansittart 1992 [1896]: 129).

We can thus see that the main terms by which the Kirant populations are known are, in fact, exogenous terms, which designated political offices and land right prerogatives. Are there then no terms peculiar to these groups which would reflect a more local conception of identity?

Endonyms and state borders

The Kulung use the same ethnonym to designate all the Kirant groups, that of *rodu*. In the Kulung versions of the origin myths, Rodu is the father of the different children who separated to go and people what is today the Rai's territory, and who gave birth to the different groups. A similar term is found among other Kirant groups, the Khaling (*da:du*), the Chamling (*rodong*), the Sangpang (*rodung*), the Umbule (*raru*), the Yakkha (*rak-dong*) and the Limbu (*yak-thung*). All these terms would seem in fact to be derived from the same root, either *rak-dung* or *rak-dong* (Hansson 1991: 83, 106); are they then the real endonyms of these populations? It is worth noticing, however, that some of these groups (like the Limbu and the Chamling) seem to use this term to designate themselves and not to refer to a larger ensemble. It is, moreover, symptomatic that one should need to make use of the reconstitution work of linguists in order to obtain a unifying term: each group is the only one that understands the term it uses to refer to the Kirant as a whole.

Within the Kirant ensemble, a term exists which would seem to designate more specifically the Rai groups and this is *khambu*. But, in reality, only the Rai groups on the western bank of the Arun recognize themselves in this term (Kulung, Thulung, Bantawa, Chamling, Khaling...). This ensemble in fact

Table 2.1 Endonyms and common names of different Kirant groups

Endonyms	*Commonly used ethnonyms*	*Ethnonyms used as surnames*
Khambu, Rodong	Rai	Rai, Jimi
Yakkha	Rai, Yakkha, Dewan	Dewan, Jimi, Majhiya
Yakhtumba	Limbu	Subba
Koiwco	Sunwar	Mukhiya

corresponds to the zone formerly designated as the Middle Kirant (that is to say, the old Sen kingdom of Chaudandi). Likewise, the Rai groups who do not recognize themselves in this name, like the Mewahang, the Lohorung, the Yakkha and the Yamphu (Gaenszle 2000: 97; Hardman 2000: 23; Forbes 1995: 67),[10] are all located in what used to constitute the Far Kirant (that is, the old Sen kingdom of Vijayapur). These two 'endonyms' can thus be correlated with the former geopolitical divisions of the region.

Drawing this parallel between two Rai ensembles and the region's former political divisions also makes it possible to understand why the term 'jimi' (landowner) was long considered by Westerners as a name designating exclusively the Rai from the Arun (Middle Kirant, to the east), as opposed to the Khambu (Far Kirant, to the west).[11] However, many Rai groups known as Khambu also call themselves Jimi (the Kulung, the Nachering and the Dumi according to my data; the Khaling according to Hansson 1991: 44; and the Chamling according to Grierson 1967 [1909]: 276). Among the Kulung, Jimi was even the only name that could be added to a first name, the term Rai being, until the beginning of the 1960s, exclusively reserved for chiefs. However, as migrations took place, above all from the west towards the east, the Khambu who arrived in the Arun region could not continue to call themselves jimi, for to present themselves as jimi would imply a master of the land position (*kipatya*) which these new immigrants could not claim. Conversely, for the Rai from the Arun, to present themselves as 'jimi' was a way of asserting their position as possessors of the land with regard to the newcomers.[12]

The correlation between the extension zone of certain ethnonyms and the former borders of kingdoms which structured the region also applies to the case of the Sunuwar, one of the Kirant subgroups.[13] The Sunuwar do not consider themselves part of the Rai ensemble, which is suprising when one knows that the Bahing, who speak a virtually identical language and claim to be related to them, call themselves Rai (Fournier 1974: 64; Hansson 1991: 5; van Driem 2000: 615). However, the Sunuwar live mainly in the Ramechap district, which was part of the Near Kirant (Hodgson 1880: 399), whilst the Bahing of the district were part of the Middle Kirant, where all groups call themselves Rai.

Political factors also seem to have influenced the delimitation and constitution of certain Rai groups. The Bantawa (371,056 speakers) and the Chamling (44,093 speakers[14]), which are the two largest Rai groups numerically, live near the towns of Bhojpur and Khotang, two urban centres since the era of the Sen kings. It is quite possible that these two groups were formed on a political basis, linked perhaps to the prerogatives associated with these former centres of regional power. For it is curious to note among the Chamling the absence of subgroups and dialectal variations, although this group is numerically very important (Hansson 1991: 20). This homogeneity, which is surprising in comparison with the other Rai groups, may be attributed to a uniformization process related to their proximity to an ancient urban centre. The Bantawa case is the opposite, but just as surprising: populations who seem to have previously formed autonomous groups consider themselves as belonging to the 'Bantawa' category

(ibid. 6). The fact that today these groups all claim to belong to the Bantawa ensemble is perhaps here again due to the proximity of a former Sen capital, which may have had a centralization movement effect on the surrounding Rai groups. Last, we note that Athpariya, the name of a Rai group located around Dankhuta, a large town in eastern Nepal, designates a bodyguard (Hansson 1991: 2), and it is possible to imagine that this office is connected to their relations with the rulers of the region.

The logic underlying the subdivisions of the Limbu ensemble (the second largest group, which, it should be remembered, forms with the Rai the Kirant ensemble) also seems to be linked to an ancient political context. The Limbu theoretically are divided into ten groups supposed to have been descended from ten ancestors. This structuring of Limbu territory into ten entities, each with a name and a dominant reference clan, but also the considerable cultural and ethnic homogeneity of these groups, may seem surprising in the light of the Rai's great cultural and linguistic diversity. Van Driem (2000) thus records that the 150,000 Limbu speak four dialects, as opposed to the thirty or so languages for the 250,000 Rai. Yet, the names of these ten Limbu groups are of Nepali origin, and refer less to a common kinship than to former political and territorial ensembles. Because of their greater geographical proximity to the Sen rulers (the latters' prime ministers are said to have been Limbu (Chemjong 1967)), the Limbu were in contact earlier than their Rai neighbours with the state powers of the region. Part of the Limbu region was, for about a century (from the second half of the seventeenth to the first half of the eighteenth century), part of the newly founded kingdom of Sikkim (Chemjong 1967; Massonaud 1982). Links were then forged between certain Limbu families and the Tibetan aristocracy; a Limbu alphabet was created, etc.

All these examples suggest that relations with certain state powers of the region may have influenced the definition of the borders and the appellations of certain Kirant groups. It is with the actual category of Kirant that we should like to finally illustrate this point.

The Kirant label: a political and land tenure category by default?

The oldest known use of the term kirant ('Cirata') to designate the populations of eastern Nepal is found in a text by Father Giuseppe (1801), who went to Nepal in 1770. Since then all Western and Nepalese authors have continued to use this term, but the populations comprising this category are not clearly defined. All agree in including the Rai, the Limbu and, almost systematically, the Yakkha. The Sunuwar and Hayu groups are also frequently included, as well as (sometimes) the Dhimal, the Danuwar and the Thami.[15] One may, however, wonder according to what criteria one or another population was given the exonym 'kirant' – an exonym which, moreover, was not accepted as an endonym until very recently, and then only by certain of them (Schlemmer 2009).

Kirant is derived from *kirata*, a term used in the ancient Sanskrit texts to designate, in an apparently generic and disparaging manner, the hunter peoples of the mountains (Schlemmer 2004). The latter seem to have been grouped together because of a common political and geographical situation – the fact of living outside any influence of a state or of the Hindu civilization. The Nepalese would thus seem to have used the term 'Kirant' to designate the populations living on the eastern fringes of their territory.[16] Whereas the populations in the centre and the west of the country had been integrated into the Hindu kingdoms for longer, the eastern populations were characterized by their considerable autonomy with regard to the royal centres. This autonomy continued under the Indo-Nepalese Gorkha kings, who, after having conquered the region, granted these populations certain specific political and land rights – the most important one being the registration of their lands under specific land right regulations which guaranteed their inalienability, the *kipat*. The Kirant – a category designating 'savages' – thus became associated with the privileges accorded by the *kipat* land rights system.

The list of the populations which received land under the *kipat* system is, according to Regmi, the 'Limbu, Rai, Majhiya [?], Bhote, Yakkha, Tamang, Hayu, Chepang, Baramu, Danuwar, Sunuwar, Kumhal, Pahari, Thami, Sherpa, Majhi and Lepcha' (1976: 88). It can be seen that all the populations associated with the Kirant ensemble appear on this list. But the opposite is not true: all the populations with *kipat* rights are not identified as Kirant. Some of them are probably not included because they have other identity referents which are more obvious than this default category. This is clearly the case for the Buddhist populations (Bhote, Tamang, Sherpa). The fact that a large majority of the Lepcha live in Sikkim, where there is no *kipat* land, means that they had little reason to come under the Kirant banner. As for the Thami and Pahari, they are culturally and socially much more part of the Newar world (the dominant population in the valley) with which they are spontaneously associated (Toffin 1981; Turin and Schneiderman 2000). Lastly, others, such as the Kumhal and the Majhi, belong to the 'service' castes (potters and boatmen respectively), and their *kipat* rights would have been obtained as a form of payment in kind for services rendered. In the light of these elements, the term Kirant seems ultimately to refer to a residual identity category comprising an ensemble of populations with no supra-local identity who are characterized by a specific right to land.

This residual nature of Kirant identity makes it possible to understand that the populations which are part of it are not so to the same degree. First, the group includes the Rai, who we have seen do not by any means form a unified population, but an ensemble of groups with different languages and customs who were the furthest away from any form of state domination. Then come the Limbu, whose identity seems to have been partially forged by their relationship with the Sikkim and the Sen kings. The fact that doubt remains about the Sunuwar's membership of the Kirant ensemble is perhaps due to their proximity to the Nepalese capitals, like Dolakha, as well as to their ancient adherence to the values of Hinduism and their long-standing submission to royal power.[17] As for the Danuwars and the Dhimal, who are culturally and linguistically distinct from

the other populations comprising the Kirant category, it can be supposed that becoming part of this ensemble offered them a relatively prestigious identity in the light of their low status.

After this survey of the different ethnonyms of the populations of eastern Nepal, numerous questions remain open, and our attempts at answers remain simple hypotheses: the facts are insufficient to make it possible to validate them entirely. This approach, nonetheless, opens avenues of research and enables us to take into consideration the influence of the region's political history. To our mind, the unification of these groups and the ensuing supra-local identities are in part the result of state influences: those of the ancient Hindu kingdoms of the plain, of the Nepalese state and perhaps of the Sikkim monarchy. It seems that it was with respect to outside powers that the region's populations felt the need to unite – and/or were united, by outside influences – in encompassing ensembles. Denomination is an eminently political act, and all groups are the product of a history. The Kirant exist just as much with respect to the relations which oppose them to other groups as by those which unite them. Here, the position they adopted with regard to political and land tenure prerogatives is revealed in the very terms the groups choose to name themselves. The Kirant's unity would, first and foremost, seem to be the result of the geographic contiguity of the communities included in this term; second, of a political situation; lastly, of a relationship to land tenure. As Vansittart wrote (1992 [1896]: 129): 'Khambu and Yakka recruits [in the famous Gorkha battalions], when first brought in for enlistment and asked what class they belong to, will reply "Jimdar", and when further pressed will answer "Rai"' (1896: 129). Let us translate this: when they were asked what group they belonged to, they replied: that of 'landowners' and when further pressed, that of 'chiefs'.

Notes

1 Heirs to a taxonomist vision of human societies, these Western observers had, nevertheless, to find a way of classifying these groups systematically. This interest in classification grew as members of the said groups were enrolled in the famous battalions of Nepalese soldiers called *gorkha*, for the British authorities' representatives then deemed it necessary to know with whom they were dealing. Most of the authors who took an interest in classifying the Nepalese populations had connections with the civil and/or military authorities of British India. William Kirkpatrick (1756–1812) was a captain, then a major, of the East India Company. Francis Buchanan, called Hamilton (1762–1829), carried out numerous investigations for the colonial authorities. Dr Archibald Campbell (1805–1874) was Superintendant of the Darjeeling district. Bryan H. Hodgson (1800–1894) was an English diplomat and scientist who became the 'resident' in Nepal in 1833. Herbert Hope Risley (1851–1911) was part of the Indian Civil Service before taking charge of the national census. Eden Vansittart (?–1936) was a colonel in the 2/5th Gurkha rifles. C. J. Morris was a major in the 2nd Bn 3rd Q. A. O. Gurkha.

2 This division into two proto-clans associated with the two founding ancestors has no sociological effect. The only marker specified as differentiating the two proto-clans is the fact that the Tamsi may eat roast pork and the Chemsi may not. On the Kulung's social organization, see Macdougal 1979.

3 The term *pau* literally designates a tree trunk. It is worth noting that, with the exception of the term *gong*, the Kulung terms are very little used. The Nepali terms *thâr* and *jât* are preferred, the former designating any unit smaller than the tribe and the term *jât* the units bigger than the tribe. It is for reasons of clarity that we have decided to name each level of segmentation by a specific term (lineage, clan, tribe, etc.). Here I should also mention that, for greater convenience for the non-specialist reader, I use a simplified form of Nepali transcription: long vowels are specified with a circumflex accent, diacritic signs are not specified. The names of groups are transcribed without any accent and are invariable words.

4 It is also worth mentioning that, during certain rituals, it is by reciting the 'genealogies' that one identifies oneself for the invisible powers. These genealogies are in fact the recitations of the names of all the wife-giving clans of one's patrilineage, of one's mother's patrilineage and of that of one's wife, going back at least seven generations. These genealogies, which inscribe the individual in a vast network formed by the past alliances of his ascendants, are peculiar to each person, and particularize, like an identity card, each individual in a patriline.

5 By 'ancestral territory', I translate the notion of *car/cariku*, which designates the springs on the territory occupied by the Kulung and, by extension, the territory itself. This notion is also close to that of *capkuwa*, which literally means 'the spring of the spirits' and designates in ritual language the Kulung's territory. In Nepali, this ancestral territory will be designated by the term *kipat*, a term designating a specific system of land tenure based on the notion of *communal land right* (Regmi 1978, cf. *infra*). *Kipat* is also more or less equivalent to the Kulung notion of *walika-dibuka*: 'place of farming and hunting activities'.

6 *Hang* is a term found in most Kirant languages, and is often translated by 'chief', or 'king'. According to Sagant (1981), before the conquest this office of chief was not hereditary: the chiefs were great men who acquired renown and power by creating a network of dependencies through alliance relationships.

7 The term *Majhiya* (from *mâjh*: the centre, the middle?) today no longer designates a population (it is unlikely it is the boatmen caste Mâjhi, a numerically and socially very unimportant group, which is discussed here). In a letter of 1836, the term Majhiya designates a group 'situated between the Dudhkosi and Arun rivers', other than the Rai, Murmi (Tamang), Yakkha, Hayu, Danuwar, Pahari, Chepang or Thami, as all these groups are also cited (Anonymous 1974b: 101). It should be noted that the term Majhiya is particularly associated with the Yakkha: for this is what they call their chief locally (Russel 1997: 341); before the 1960s a district (*thum*) of the name Das Majhiya (the 10 Majhiya) existed in the Yakkha habitat zone. However, the Yakkha do not live between the Dhud and Arun Rivers, but to the west of the Arun, in the Far Kirant.

8 The existence of the Yakkha is mentioned by Campbell as early as 1840, and their association with the term *Dewan* is noted for the first time by Risley (1981 [1891]: 14). Like the term Rai, the term Dewan was perhaps already used to designate a political office and/or a population. In the absence of any source, it is hard to say how this term came to designate the Yakkha. Was there a Yakkha named Dewan at the Sen court (or later)? Was it simply a matter of these groups wanting to appropriate a prestigious term?

9 The term *Limbu* is also an exonym of which the first occurrence we have been able to record is found in one of the royal edicts cited above in 1774. This term has also been the subject of different etymologies (Chemjong 1967; Subba 1995: 22). In the Sikkim the Limbu are called Tsong ('merchants'), and their endonym is Yakthumba, as Campbell noted as early as 1840.

10 For part of these groups, the term *Yakkha* seems to play a role analogous to that of Khambu: the Lohorung call their language 'yakkhaba khap' (Hansson 1991: 64), the Yamphu call themselves Yakkhaba (Forbes 1995: 68) and there is a group usually designated by Yakkha (Russel 1997). Moreover, Risley describes the Yamphu and the Lohorung ('Lhorong') as Yakkha subgroups (1981 [1891]: 141).

11 A first mention of the term *Jimidar* is found in a letter from the Gorkha administration dated 1790, which seems to take the term as a synonym of Rai (Anonymous 1974b: 121). In fact, many Rai groups call themselves 'jimi': the Yakkha, the Mewahang, the Kulung, the Lohorung, the Athpaharia, the Yamphu and the Dumi (in order: Russel 1997; Gaenszle 2000; my data: Hardman 2000; Dahal 1985; Forbes 1995; Grierson 1967 [1909]). As these groups are located in the Arun region, Gaenszle asserts that the term designates the Rai from the east, as opposed to the Khambu (2000: 97).

12 Dahal (1985: 16) writes that the Athpahariya Rai 'are called Jimdar-Jimdarni by outsiders, while in Okhaldunga, Khotang and Bhojpur districts [e.g. areas where they are not 'authochthons'], they are called Khumbu-Khumbuni'. The author specifies later that the fact they are called Jimdar 'reflects the fact that they are recognised as the indigenous people of the area' (*idem*). The fact that jimi is also used by the Athpahariya to designate an earth divinity well illustrates its association with autochthony (ibid. 25).

13 According to Muller (*n.d.*: 8), this term comes from the Nepali and means those who live 'on this side (vâr) [east] of the *Sun* river', the others being called the *sunpâr* (those who livee on the other side (*pâr*) of the river). The Sunuwar sometimes call their language kwoico (or Koich), which is perhaps their endonym. The first occurrence of the word *sunuwar* we have been able to record is found in an official document from 1792 (Anonymous 1974b: 125).

14 According to the 2001 census. Though 77.6 per cent of the Rai speak a Rai language, Bantawa is used as the vehicular language between the different Rai groups (73 percent of Rai language speakers); there are thus more Bantawa speakers than people who call themselves Bantawa and more Chamling than Chamling speakers.

15 See Kirkpatrick 1986 [1811]; Hamilton 1986 [1819]; Campbell 1840; Hodgson 1858; Vansittart 1992 [1896]. For more recent classifications, see Bista 1967; Gaborieau 1978. Let us briefly present the new groups cited:

- The Hayu, who live in a few villages to the south of the Sunuwar, in the Near Kirant, were, as early as 1811; classed as Kirant by Kirkpatrick. Their language is related to the branch of the western Kirant.
- The Dhimal, who are divided into some twenty villages in the Jhapa and Morang districts, call themselves Kirant and are sometimes named 'Limbu of the plain'. Linguistically and culturally, they are close to the Mech and the Koch, two Assamese populations who speak Tibeto-Burmese languages of the Bodo-Garo family (see Regmi 1991; van Driem 2000: 501–566 and bibliography).
- The Danuwar, who live in central and eastern Nepal (the Cinduli and Udhaypur districts), call themselves Rai although they speak an Indo-European language and are quite close to the Majhi boatmen caste. Among the four clans which compose the society, one is called 'Rai' (Klaus and Rai 1975).
- The Thami, who live between the Kathmandu valley and the Sunuwar region, were also sometimes part of the Kirant ensemble despite the similarities with the Newar culture and language. Besides, most of them seem to see themselves as part of the Newar world and Kirant identity is only claimed by a few intellectuals from this group (Turin 2002: 257).

16 This aspect, which is more sociological than ethnic, would explain why this term also designated, at the end of the fourteenth century, in the Newar caste system of the Kathmandu valley (Petech 1958: 183), a hunter caste. For a synthesis of the debates on the notion of Kirant, see Gaenszle (2000: 76); Schlemmer (2009).

17 They are thus said to have been in favour of the occupying forces, at the time of conquest, and to have assisted at the capture of Bhatgaon in 1769; In 1826, it is said to be at their own request that they abandoned their prerogatives over the paddy-fields remaining to them in exchange for the right to employ Brahmins (Muller, *n.d.*: 106).

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